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A Little Talk Every Month with Those
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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THE FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTE—SURPRISE

(Third Installment)

BEFORE applying the surprise test to forms of literature other than fiction, it may be well to frame a definition that will help us to recognize surprise under the various guises in which it appears in the written word.

Among several definitions of the verb "to surprise" authorized by Webster are the following: "To come upon or attack suddenly and unexpectedly;" "To take unawares;" "To strike with wonder, astonishment, or confusion, by something sudden, unexpected, or remarkable; as, his conduct *surprised* me."

In our preceding studies we have found that in fiction the incidents, turns of events, and even sentence arrangements which take the reader unawares, or upon which he comes suddenly and unexpectedly, are features that produce surprise. We have found also that some developments in fiction which lack the sudden element—such as the gradual reformation of a character—have the surprise element. They "strike with wonder" by "something remarkable" rather than "something sudden."

We have observed that the bringing together of incongruous elements produces surprise, whether in a plot or in a sentence.

It would never be claimed that surprise is the only element of interest in the written word; but it can be successfully maintained that surprise in some form and degree is present in almost any mode of expression that is interesting.

News.

A new idea or a newly discovered fact inevitably contains some element of surprise.

The newspaper headline which tells us that a prominent man has been assassinated owes most of its interest to the fact that it takes us unawares. But even to those who already know of the occurrence, the surprise of seeing how the account looks in print makes the article that describes the tragedy interesting.

The facts in any case need not be altogether new to us in order

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to surprise. We attend a concert, for example, then we read the reviewer's comments in the next day's papers, not because it is any surprise to us to learn that the concert took place, but by way of comparing his views with our own. We are surprised by the points upon which he disagrees with us, and again by those wherein he agrees.

If we put down the newspaper with the disgusted comment, "There is nothing in the paper tonight," we naturally do not mean that it contains no reading matter. We mean that it contains very little information of unexpected or remarkable nature.

Were today's paper to come out with the announcement, "Germany has signed the armistice terms," we should perhaps be astonished at the stupidity of the editor—certainly not at the information, which has become an old story.

Yet the announcement once had power to surprise us to the utmost.

While the "news" of the signing of the armistice has lost this power to strike us with wonder, we still are capable of being interested—perhaps startled—by learning of various intimate details, inside facts, and unexpected developments connected with the occurrence.

It is not always easy to recognize the surprise element in news. Occasionally, it must be granted, news which is worthy of a front-page position contains almost no apparent surprise; it is merely informative. For instance, an item to the effect that the country has raised two-thirds of its quota in some war-work drive will not appreciably surprise a reader who has followed the progress of the drive. The item that express rates are to be raised twelve cents a hundred pounds is informative rather than surprising in character. The same might be said of the information that the allied shipping losses for October totaled 93,000 tons.

We read with interest of these matters almost exclusively for the information which they contain. They do not, however, disprove the contention that surprise is a necessary element of news interest. They simply are examples in which the proportion of surprise is so meager as to defy clear recognition. That the surprise is there we perceive theoretically, as it were, rather than by conscious recognition—just as we are aware by theory and inference rather than by testimony of our senses that some degree of heat is present in snow and ice, and even in liquid air, as in all other known forms assumed by matter. These informative items are surprising in the sense that all facts not known or clearly recalled by us are surprising.

But in the bulk of news reports the surprise element is present in sufficient proportion to be clearly recognized, and in much of the news it is the chief ingredient.

Informative Articles.

Weekly magazines such as Collier's, or The Saturday Evening Post, and various reviews, as well as the monthly magazines, to a less extent, use material which is subject practically to the same law that governs newspaper policy. They cannot give the main facts—such as the torpedoing of a great ship, the winning or losing of a battle, the signing of the armistice—while these facts remain news; but they can give side lights on the occurrences, insight into the meaning of events, and other details which have informative value.

Their effort is to supplement and go beyond the newspapers, when possible, by giving intimate pictures of important happenings—these “close-ups” having all the interest of surprise and novelty.

To take an analogous case: The first glimpse of a mountain cottage situated on a jutting crag may cause surprise and interest from its striking location. As a result of this interest we may come nearer and discover another surprising fact—that a rope ladder furnishes the only means of entrance to the cottage. Coming still closer, we may notice that the cottage is chained to the rock rather than imbedded in it by means of a foundation. And so, at every step, we either discover something new and strange about the cottage, or else anticipate some fresh discovery.

The same principle applies to subjects which are not of interest peculiarly for timely reasons. Articles upon the habits of bird and animal species, upon the political situation, the economic phases of certain legislation, the treatment of typhoid fever, the culture of roses, the employment of substitutes in bread-making, the fundamentals of journalism, the trimming of hats, the technique of story-writing, how a successful financier got his start, poultry-raising, mine-operation, oddities of science—these all interest and instruct us in proportion to the freshness of the information they contain and the surprising facts or ideas they suggest.

It should be noted, however, that the action of the surprise element in any strictly informative article is dependent upon the reader. There are two senses in which this is true. To a certain reader the information set forth in an article may be an old story—hence, not interesting—not surprising. To another reader it will open up an entirely new viewpoint.

Again, information upon subjects with which the reader is unconcerned produces no effect. The average feminine reader is not likely to be surprised by a newspaper heading which announces that “Jimmy Fulton has been matched against Kid McGinnis for the lightweight championship.” How can she be surprised when she takes no interest in the matter—when she does not know whether the item is important and unexpected in sporting circles, or a mere detail? On the other hand, a “discovery” item in a household publi-

cation, telling how to remove fruit-stains, which has surprise value for her, would have no sort of interest to the average male.

These Student-Writer discussions—to employ an illustration very near home—are interesting to writers in proportion to their concern with the subjects discussed and the novelty or suggestiveness which the ideas may seem to have.

For the writer of informative articles, the best general rule that can be laid down is: Select topics upon which you are qualified to tell your readers things they did not know—and carefully weave into your article the most novel elements that you can select.

If you are writing a personality sketch, tell—or, at least, “play up”—the unusual and least-known facts about your character. No one cares that the man who is now at the head of a big industry went through the lower grades as a boy and was graduated from high school before attending college. These are commonplace facts—they would almost be taken for granted and can produce no surprise. But it would be of great interest—because more unexpected, unusual—if you should relate that the present captain of industry once failed as a country storekeeper, or that as a boy he had enjoyed the sport of training grasshoppers.

Essays.

More or less vaguely distinguished from the informative article is the essay. Whereas the first seeks to tell us what happened, or how to do something, the other seeks to stimulate our ideas.

The essay—at least for the purpose of this discussion—may be said to include inspirational articles, editorials, arguments, reflections, and the like. Its interest lies in surprise, a subtle form of it, perhaps, but undoubtedly surprise—the surprise of new ideas.

Sometimes the novelty belongs to the subject-matter; sometimes it is in the new viewpoint or in the style of the writer.

Carlyle’s satirical essay on “The Art of Murder” was effective from the startling selection of subject-matter. We are amazed to discover that murder may be treated as an art, and the surprise is sustained by the author’s judicial comments upon the topic from the standpoint of a professed connoisseur in murders.

It will be noted that this surprise is largely the result of classing together incongruous elements—art and murder. It happens that in this case the two factors really are incongruous—and the result, therefore, is satire. If they were only apparently incongruous, the result probably would be a serious composition. Take, for example, the subject of a recent Atlantic Monthly essay: “Bread and the Battle.”

While these two B’s apparently have nothing in common, the author shows us that in reality they are closely connected—the incongruity is apparent, not real.

Style and other literary features, however, offer the chief opportunities for surprise in essay work. It is a surprise to read a beautiful thought beautifully expressed, or to find a striking fact set forth in words that fairly burn their way into the consciousness.

Who can handle the snap and vigor of the surprises in the following excerpts from an article entitled "Should Language Be Abolished?" by Harold Goddard in the July, 1918, Atlantic:*

Whether language should be abolished is, doubtless, an open question. Whether it is being abolished is not an open question. It is being abolished. Its abolition is going on around us everywhere, with increasing rapidity. The process, to be sure, is an unconscious one. But unconscious processes are generally the most elemental and momentous. If this particular radical alteration in the habits of humanity is a desirable one, well and good; let it go on. If it is not, it is high time to become aware of it and do what we can to check it. * * *

What! you exclaim, language being abolished, when every fresh edition of the dictionary has to make room for thousands of new words; when newspapers and magazines multiply faster than rabbits in Australia; when talks and speeches and lectures are crowded into every hour of the day and night?

Yes, in the teeth of these facts, I stand by my assertion.

As for the dictionary, it is indeed growing obese. But may not this very obesity be a symptom of the unhealthy condition of that which resides within it? And when it comes to the magazines and newspapers, compare them with those of a generation ago, and you will see what is happening: the printed matter, where it has not been crowded out by highly pictorial advertisements, is subsiding into a sort of gloss (more or less superfluous) on the illustrations. Pages formerly uniform to the verge of monotony are now diversified by photographs, diagrams, cartoons, and a dozen other graphic features. * * *

And there are indications of an analogous change on the public platform. Oratory, in the old sense, it is generally admitted, is dead. There are still places—the United States Senate, for instance, and certain pulpits—where speeches are yet made; but nobody takes them very seriously. The kind of public utterance that is taken seriously is the lecture by the chemist or physicist, where the apparatus and experiments do the real talking; by the economist and sociologist, who relies far more on exhibits, diagrams, and graphs than on words, to get his thought across; by the traveler or explorer, whose tongue has become the tip of a pointer touching a screen; or by any of a score of other speakers who talk predominantly through things and pictures rather than language.

And I spoke of sermons. The Catholic Church continues to flourish, for one reason, I imagine, because language was never its primary medium of expression. And the Quakers, whose specialty is silence, still survive.

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Even some of the other churches, if they have sufficient good music and architecture, attract their worshippers. * * *

And speaking of the church reminds us of the theatre. * * * Well—have not a hundred authorities on the drama told us that the secret of making a play consists precisely in eliminating language? Whoever, when a theatrical piece has been in rehearsal, has seen a bit of stage business suddenly render a page of dialogue superfluous, has received one of the most impressive lessons art can offer concerning the relation of language and expression. And what pantomime does toward abolishing language by its appeal to the eye, the voice seeks to do through its appeal to the ear. Intonation and inflection, in the theatre, may become as potent eliminators of language as action and gesture are.

Considered from this angle, what is the whole art of music, indeed, but a protest against language, an attempt to evolve a higher mode of expression? All art in fact proceeds from this same dissatisfaction. It is an endeavor to supersede language with something better. To this statement literature itself is only an apparent exception. Literature, especially in its purest form, poetry, is an attempt to purge language of everything except its music and its pictures, an attempt to think by means of sound and light. The poets—where they have been genuine creators and not mere word-mongers—have always insisted, accordingly, that theirs is the art of striking out words; have always stood, if not for the abolition of language, at any rate for its drastic abbreviation.

This is a paradox only to prosaic minds. The man of prosaic mind thinks that composition is a matter of so arranging words that they shall convey a meaning that is the sum of their separate meanings. But the poet knows better. He knows that it is a matter of so ordering them that they shall suggest verbally inexpressible meanings between the lines; that they shall, quite literally, set spirits to dancing from sentence to sentence, flashes of intellectual electricity to leaping from page to page, faces to peeping forth at the reader from behind the letters like children from behind tree-trunks.

Literature is indeed omission—not in the negative sense of leaving things out, but in the positive sense of making the omitted thing conspicuous. Language, accordingly, in the hands of its masters, may be more properly called the scaffolding of expression than the expression itself. To confuse language with expression, therefore, is like confusing the magician's wand with the spirits it calls up. If pedants had not been guilty of precisely this confusion, the movement for the abolition of language might never have been necessary. It is the pedants and the prosaic people generally who transform from cynicism to truth the saying that language was given man to conceal his thoughts.

That this in sober truth is the function of words seems to be the opinion of the youngest of the arts,—wherein language survives much as

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the vermiform appendix survives in the human body,—the moving picture. The moving picture of to-day is but an amoeba to the moving picture of to-morrow; yet already it has abolished, in the aggregate, billions of words. What it will do in the future, who dares predict? It sometimes seems as if, with its advent, mankind were definitely committed to the method of thinking in pictures. Should this prove true, the cinematograph may well turn out to be the most momentous invention since the invention of letters. In it, for the first time in feasible form, humanity has an instrument of expression fairly adequate to the dynamic and flowing quality of life. * * *

Among sensitive and congenial spirits, words, in the sense in which we find them in the dictionary, have much the function that sand has for the locomotive; they enable the wheels of thought to clutch the track of conversation; but they are as far from being the soul of intercourse as the sand is from being the movement of the train.

The soul of intercourse in the intimacies of life is much more a matter of action and music than it is of language. The parents glance across the table at each other—and suddenly the daughter's face turns crimson. The brother's eye turns by an imperceptible degree—and presto! the sister passes him the salt. The baby's under-lip begins to go down—and like a flash the mother has leaped into the breach. "Hm," says the husband as he tastes the soup; and though the sound means nothing to the outsider, to the wife it speaks volumes. "No," says the maiden to the youth; and by some alchemy of tone the familiar monosyllable reverses its accepted meaning. "Oh!" cries the child as she receives the apple; and that "oh" says, "Thank you," as unmistakably as her tardily added, "Thank you, Mrs. Jones," says, "I'm remembering to say what mother told me."

Thus does the human voice play the old witch with the dictionary.

Statement of the Ownership, Management, Circulation, etc., Required by the Act of Congress of Aug. 24, 1912.

of THE STUDENT-WRITER, published monthly, at Denver, Colo., for October, 1913.

Before me, a notary in and for the state and county aforesaid, personally appeared Willard E. Hawkins, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the business manager of The Student-Writer, Denver, Colo., and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management and circulation, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 443, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

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WILLARD E. HAWKINS, Editor.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 9th day of October, 1913.

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We acknowledge a temptation to go over this article, paragraph by paragraph, and point out the surprises, in subject-matter, in development, and in style—but to do so would be uncomplimentary to the reader as well as to the author. The essay from which the above selections are made certainly furnishes an excellent illustration of the theory here advanced—aside from its significance, thoughtful preparation, and hints peculiarly valuable to literary workers.

—W. E. H.

(Continued in next number)

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